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MODES OF DEBATE AND REFUTATION
OF ADVERSARIES IN CLASSICAL
AND MEDIEVAL INDIA:
A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

JOHANNES BRONKHORST

SRAVANA BELGOLA is the centre of those adherents of the religion of Jainism that call themselves Digambaras. It is famous for the gigantic statue of a Jaina saint that was erected there in the 10th century CE. This statue tells a lot about what Digambara Jainism is all about: it depicts the saint Bāhubali, standing completely naked in a rigid position which he clearly has maintained for a long time, for (sculpted) lianes grow around his limbs. Jainism of the Digambara variety is well-known for the severity of its religious practices: its monks are completely naked (*digambara* means as much as «naked»), practise absolute non-violence with regard to all living beings, and many of them choose to die by abstaining from all food.¹

In and near Sravana Belgola there are many inscriptions which commemorate the voluntary death by starvation chosen by Jainas who resided there. One long inscription commemorates the death of a preceptor called Malliṣeṇa-Maladhārīdeva on Sunday, the 10th March 1129 CE. It was composed by one of his lay-disciples, and must therefore date from that same time. This inscription is interesting because it enumerates some forty earlier famous Digambaras, and briefly characterizes a number of them.² Several of these are reported to have engaged in public debates and to have defeated thinkers belonging to other schools of thought: Samantabhadra; Vakraḡrīva, who overcame the crowd of orators by his power of speech, so that the disputants in this world were bent with shame; Maheśvara, who was victorious in seventy great disputations and in innumerable others; Akalaṅka, who describes himself as the destroyer of the whole pride of scholars and defeated the Bauddhas (i.e., Buddhists) at the court of Himaśītala, a king otherwise unknown; Vimalacandra, who subdued the pride of all disputants, and challenged the Śaivas, Pāśupatas, Bauddhas, Kāpālikas and Kāpilas in a letter which he affixed to the gate of the palace of a king named (or surnamed) Śatrubhayaṁkara; Hemasena, surnamed Vidyādhanaṁjaya, who addressed an unnamed king and challenged other disputants; Vādirāja, who challenged other disputants in the capital of an unnamed Cālukya emperor to a disputation which appears to have taken place in the presence of the emperor himself; Vādībhakaṇṭhīrava, who ruined opponents by refuting their views.

Several points deserve attention. Many if not most of the debates in which these scholars are recorded to have participated took place at royal courts, often in the presence of the king. For example, the inscription attributes to Samantabhadra the following verses (vv. 7-8):

¹ SETTAR 1990.

² E. HULTZSCH in «EpInd», 3 (1894-1895), p. 184 ff.

At first the drum was beaten by me within the city of Pāṭaliputra, afterwards in the country of Mālava, Sindhu, and Ṭhakka, at Kāñcipura [and] at Vaidīśa. I have [now] reached Karahāṭaka, which is full of soldiers, rich in learning, [and] crowded [with people]. Desirous of disputations, O king! I exhibit the sporting of a tiger. While Samantabhadra stands disputing in thy court, O king! even the tongue of Dhūrjaṭi (i.e., Śiva), who talks distinctly and skilfully, quickly wanders [back] into [its] hole. What hope [of success is there] for other [opponents]?

Debates, even important ones, did not always take place at the royal court. Especially the great Buddhist universities held debates with outsiders on their premises, but even there the presence of the king was requested. This may be concluded from the following account occurring in *The Life and Teaching of Nāropa*. It describes what happened when Nāropa (A.D. 1016-1100) became head of a department at the university of Nalanda:¹

According to the Indian custom when a new scholar was installed, it was the rule to hold a debate between the Buddhist scholars and those of other philosophical systems. An announcement was made that a debate would be held in a fortnight, and all the scholars assembled in order to tear any professed doctrine to pieces. In the middle court of the university of Nalanda a throne was erected for the king, presiding over the conference. To his right and left the scholars, Buddhist and Hindu, were seated. First the Elder bsTan-pa 'dzin-pa (= Nāropa) debated with the Buddhists for half a month, but nobody could defeat him. Then the Hindus held forth for another fortnight, discussing grammar, epistemology, spiritual precepts, and logic. Contending with all sorts of spiritual powers and miraculous faculties, the Elder won a complete victory over his opponents. *The king Phyogs-kyo gocha (Digvarman) then addressed the assembly: «I am the impartial patron of both parties. But in this contest to vindicate the truth nobody could defeat the Elder bsTan-pa 'dzin-pa and an unusual faith in the liberating power of the Victorious One (the Buddha) has been created everywhere».*

At that time the staff of Nalanda requested the Elder bsTan-pa 'dzin-pa to become their abbot and they conferred upon him the name 'Jigs-med grags-pa (Abhayakīrti).

The venerable Abhayakīrti defeated all the non-Buddhist scholars and he composed the following verses:

With the iron hook of grammar, the lore of knowledge, logic
 And spiritual precepts
 I, the Elder Abhayakīrti
 Have scattered the opponents as a flock of sparrows.
 With the axe of grammar, the lore of knowledge, logic
 And spiritual precepts
 I have felled the opponents' tree.
 With the lamp of certainty in logic and precepts
 I have burnt the darkness of my foes' ignorance.
 With the sacred jewels of the three disciplines
 Have I removed the dirt of impurity.
 With instruction's battering ram
 Have I conquered the vicious city of bewilderment.
 At Nalanda in the presence of the king
 Have I felled the ever trembling tree of the heretics.
 With the razor of the Buddha's doctrine
 I have shaved the hair of my opponent heretics,
 And have raised the banner of the Buddha's doctrine.

At that time 100 learned Hindu teachers shaved their heads, were converted to Buddhism, and were followed three days later by another 600. The inmates of Nalanda university hoisted the

¹ GUENTHER 1963, pp. 20-22.

great banner, beat the big drum, blew the conch of the Dharma and were full of joy and happiness. *The great king Digvarman showed his faith in and respect for the venerable Abhayakīrti, bowed many times to him, and touched the latter's feet with his head saying, 'I am happy to be your patron'.*

After the defeat of the heretical doctrines this great scholar spread the Buddha's message for eight years.

It goes without saying that there were not only formal debates. Especially the Buddhist monasteries were suited to informal debates, which were much practised, according to the reports of Chinese pilgrims who visited them, most notably Yijing and Xuanzang. Scharfe (2002, p. 162 f.) sums up some of their observations: «Much time was spent in disputations, where eminent men "discuss possible and impossible doctrines", (Yijing) to sharpen their wits, deepen their understanding and demonstrate their sophistication. Their intellectual level was quite forbidding: "Of those from abroad who wished to enter the schools of discussion the majority, beaten by the difficulties of the problems, withdrew; and those who were deeply versed in old and modern learning were admitted, only two or three out of ten succeeding".... All these institutions were residential colleges where everyone was constantly engulfed in intellectual challenges: "learning and discussing they found the day too short; day and night they admonished each other, juniors and seniors mutually helping to perfection. If among them were any who did not talk of the mysteries of the Tripiṭaka such persons, being ashamed, lived aloof." (Xuanzang)». Scharfe (2002, p. 163) further draws attention to a passage from a classical Sanskrit literary work: «Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* tells of an āśrama in the Vindhya mountains headed by Divākara, a brahmin of the Maitrāyaṇī branch who had converted to Buddhism. Here followers of all schools imaginable, from Jainas to Kṛṣṇa devotees, materialists, followers of tantra and Vedic ritualists lived in harmony and scholarly debate: clearly an exaggeration, where even monkeys, parrots and maina birds lectured and debated.»

Returning now to the formal debates that were held at the royal court, some indications as to the manner in which they were initiated can be derived from the inscription from Sravana Belgola. «Beating the kettle-drum (*bherī*)» was apparently one of these, used by Samantabhadra in various places. Vādirāja used a smaller drum (*ḍiṇḍima*) to discourage his opponents (v. 42): «In the victorious capital of the glorious Cālukya emperor (*cakreśvara*), [which is] the birth-place of the goddess of Speech, the sharp-sounding drum of the victorious Vādirāja suddenly roams about. [The drum sounds] *jahi* (i.e. strike!), [as though] its pride in disputation were rising; [it sounds] *jahihi* (i.e. give up!), [as though] it were filled with the conceit of being convincing; [it sounds] *jahāhi* (i.e. give up!), [as though] it were envious of the speech [of others]; [and it sounds] *jahīhi* (i.e. give up!), [as though] it boasted of clear, soft, sweet and pleasant poetry!» Vimalacandra affixed a letter in public that was addressed to his opponents.

Something about the way in which these debates were conducted can be learnt from a verse which Hemasena is supposed to have uttered (v. 37): «Whoever, inflated by [his] practice in logic [and] grammar and by [his] wisdom, competes with me in disputation before learned umpires (*madhyastha*) in the presence of kings, on that scholar I shall inevitably inflict a thorough defeat, which cannot be measured (i.e. described) by words. Know, O king! that such is the belief of Hemasena!»

Debaters are compared, or compare themselves, with victorious warriors or kings. Akalaṅka, for example, is supposed to have uttered the following verse (v. 21): «O king

Sāhasatuṅga! There are many kings with white parasols; but [kings] who are as victorious in war, [and] as distinguished by liberality, as thou, are hard to find. Thus, there are [many] scholars in the Kali age; [but] none [among them] are such poets, such masters among disputants, so eloquent, [and] of minds equally skilled by the study of various sciences, as I.» And again (v. 22): «As thou, O king! art known here [on earth] to be skilled in subduing the arrogance of all the enemies, so am I famed on this earth as the destroyer of the whole pride of scholars. If not, here I am, [and] here in thy court good [and] great men are always present. Whose is the power to speak, let him dispute [with me], if he should know all sciences.» Comparisons with other forms of violence occur, too. Paravādimalla explains his own name by pointing out that he is a wrestler (*malla*) who wrestles with those who hold other views (*paravādin*). Vādībhakaṇṭhīrava is described as one «by whom the elephants, (viz.) the disputants, are quickly precipitated into the pit of the ruined well of refutation»; this comparison is inspired by his name, which means «the lion to the elephants, (viz.) the disputants». A slightly different but equally aggressive comparison occurs in connection with Padmanābha (v. 62): «Having lost the abundance of their great pride, having forgotten the fierceness of their envy, uttering pitiable cries, [and] not knowing to which direction to turn, – the elephants, (viz.) the opponents in disputations, ah! run away trembling at the [very] smell of the mast elephant, (viz.) the holy scholar Padmanābha.» The comparison of rhetorical skill with war is clear from a pillar inscription from around 900 CE, in which the Brahmin Guravamiśra, or Rāma Guravamiśra, sings his own praise in the following words:¹ «In the assemblies of the learned he at once confounded the pride of self-conceit of opponents by his speeches to which the constant study of the Śāstras imparted deep meaning, just as, possessed of boundless wealth of valour, he did in battle the conceit of bravery of enemies.»

The use of drums may not be without significance either. Big drums were used to proclaim the beginning of a war. This is illustrated by the following verse (no. 62) from the Piṭhāpuram pillar inscription of Prithvisvara, dating from the end of the twelfth century CE:² «Having heard the loud roar of the drums (*paṭaha*) proclaiming [his] start for war, the crowds of his enemies quickly leave [their] countries, flee in [all] directions with eyes trembling with fear, and roam about, thinking constantly: “Is this the thunder of the cloud of destruction, or the sound of huge piercing arrows, or the howling of the wind at the end of the Kalpa?”» A verse from the Mahābhārata (3.274.18) constitutes an illustration from a much earlier time:³ «When Rāvaṇa was attacked, creatures made the sound *hāhā*, and divine lion’s roars with kettle drums (*paṭaha*) thundered in the sky.»

What did debaters expect from such encounters at the royal court? The fact that the royal court is so often mentioned is a clear indication that the debaters hoped to impress not only their rivals but the king as well. Kings could provide them with protection and favours, such as honors and support in the form of gifts of money or land. The very best a debater could hope for was, inevitably, to convert the king to his cause. This did indeed sometimes happen. One verse (v. 52) of the Sravana Belgola inscription may have to be interpreted in this way: «Fortunate is that sage, on whom the Pāṇḍya king, who had received a wealth of knowledge through his favour, conferred the title “Lord” (*svāmin*), [and] whose name Śabdacaturmukha was celebrated in the court of king

¹ F. KIELHORN in «EpInd», 2 (1894), pp. 160-167, v. 22.

² E. HULTZSCH in «EpInd», 4 (1896-1897), pp. 32-54.

³ Tr. Scharf 2003, p. 774.

Āhavamalla.»¹ Converting the king is also a theme that occurs in stories. The Jaina scholar Hemacandra, for example, converted King Kumārapāla of Gujarat according to the *Kumārapālapratibodha* of Somaprabhasūri.² King Āma, son of Yaśovarman of Kanauj (eighth century CE) was converted by a Jaina monk, according to Rājaśekhara's *Prabandhakośa*.³

Debaters, then, were interested in the king. Was the king interested in them? It is hard to find out.⁴ Debates are not often mentioned in inscriptions. Inscriptions regularly record donations, often of land. Occasionally the qualities of donees are mentioned as justification for a donation, but skill in debates does not figure among them, and references to specific debates are extremely rare. We learn from a stone inscription from Malhar, to be dated 1167-1168 CE, that a certain Brahmin called Gaṅgādhara, described as «king of the twice-born» and as someone who «in a crowd of hostile disputants resorted to [arguments] difficult to be met» (*durggāśleṣakaro 'rivādinivahe*), was in due time given a village by a king in another part of the country.⁵ Though no cause-effect relationship is specified, it is possible that Gaṅgādhara had attained his reputation at least in part by means of his ability to stand up to the arguments of hostile disputants. It will be difficult to find further inscriptional evidence for kingly rewards for skilful debaters.⁶

Other skills may have been much more interesting for worldly rulers. An inscription from Madhya Pradesh that may have been made in the very same year as the inscription from Sravana Belgola just considered has been summarized in the following manner: «In the presence of all astronomers at the court of Ratnadeva (II), Padmanābha asserted that there would be total lunar eclipse when three quarters of the night had passed and the moon was in the asterism Rohiṇī on Thursday, the full-moon tithi of Kārttika in the [Kalachuri] year 880 (8th November, 1128 A.D.). When the eclipse occurred at the predicted time, the king became pleased and donated the village of Chiñchātālāī, situated in the maṇḍala of Anarghavallī, to Padmanābha.»⁷ An unexpected yet predicted eclipse, one might think, is more fun for a king than an unintelligible discussion about philosophical niceties.⁸

¹ HULTZSCH («EpInd», 3 [1894-1895], p. 204 n. 3) interprets «who had received a wealth of knowledge through his favour» as «who was converted to the Jaina religion». Cf. the stone inscription from Humcha, perhaps dating from around 1530 CE, described in GUÉRINOT 1908, no. 667, p. 238: «Éloge de Vidyānandasvāmī ou Vādi-Vidyānanda, chef des munis de Gerasoppe, et auteur du Buddhēśa-bhavana-vyākhyāna (en canara). Il fréquenta la cour de plusieurs rois, entre autres celle du Cāṅgaḷva Nañjadeva, du Śāḷuva Kṛṣṇadeva, de Bhairava ... Il soutint avec succès plusieurs controverses religieuses et fit, en particulier, abjurer la foi franque (Periṅgiya-mata = chrétienne?) à un vice-roi de Śrīraṅganagara (Seringapatam). Aussi son éloquence est-elle comparée à celle d'Akalaṅka et de Bāṇa.»

² GRANOFF 1998, p. 10.

³ DONIGER O'FLAHERTY 1983, p. 117.

⁴ ALI (2004) does not mention debates in his study of courtly culture in early medieval India.

⁵ KIELHORN in «EpInd», 1 (1892), pp. 39-45.

⁶ Typical may be a pillar inscription from around 900 CE in Bengal, in which the Brahmin Guravamiśra, or Rāma Guravamiśra, sings his own praise in the following words: «In the assemblies of the learned he at once confounded the pride of self-conceit of opponents by his speeches to which the constant study of the Śāstras imparted deep meaning, just as, possessed of boundless wealth of valour, he did in battle the conceit of bravery of enemies» (F. KIELHORN in «EpInd», 2 [1894], pp. 160-167). The Brahmin apparently has to glorify himself, and no reward is mentioned. GUÉRINOT (1908, p. 239) speaks of «Viśālākṛti, pontife du Balātkāra gaṇa, qui soutint avec succès une controverse à la cour de Virūpākṣa [II?] de Vijayanagara (vers 1480 ap. J.-C.); son fils, Vidyānandamuni, qui fut honoré par le roi Śāḷuva Mallirāya». Was the son rewarded for the success in debate of the father?

⁷ SIRCAR 1983, p. 349. Cp. GUPTA 1983, p. 25.

⁸ Astrological activities did not only work in favour of Brahmins. Copper plates probably from the ninth century CE described by H. Lüders («EpInd», 4 [1896-97], pp. 332-349) report that the Jaina muni Arkakṛti was presented a village «for his having warded off the evil influence of Saturn from Vimalāditya, the governor of the Kunuṅgil district» (p. 333).

Poetic competition as a means to gain rewards may be illustrated by an inscription from the eleventh century CE in which the gift of a village is recorded to a certain Nārāyaṇa who, «because by his clever verses he puts to shame would-be poets, is rightly called Kavībhavajrāṅkuśa, “the adamantine elephant-goad of poets”».¹

There can be no doubt that debaters could be confronted with what we might consider unfair competition. An inscription from the end of the twelfth century in a Śiva temple in Dharwar, not too far from Sravana Belgola, tells us that Jainas were confronted with a challenge against which their debating skills were of no avail. A devotee of Śiva called Rāma challenged them in the following manner: He would cut off his own head, offer it to Śiva, and get it back from him. They, from their side, had to commit themselves in writing to replacing their Jina image with an image of Śiva in case he succeeded. Unfortunately for the Jainas, Rāma succeeded completely. He cut off his own head, which was subsequently exhibited in public for seven days. At the end of this period he got it back without as much as a scar. The Jainas, the inscription tells us, were not keen to replace their Jina image. Rāma therefore took to action and destroyed their image. The Jainas went to King Bijjaṇa and complained. Rāma then offered the king to repeat his feat, on condition this time that the Jainas committed themselves in writing to hand over all the Jina images from all of their eight hundred shrines. The Jainas would even be allowed this time to burn his separated head. King Bijjaṇa would have loved to see this miracle, but the Jainas chickened out. King Bijjaṇa, though a sympathiser of Jainism, thereupon laughed in their faces, dismissed them, and gave a village to the Śiva temple of Rāma.²

We may conclude from the above that the entertainment value of philosophical debates was limited for kings, who might prefer something more exciting. And yet debates might make a difference. The Buddhist Śīlabhadra, according to the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, once defeated a Brahmin in debate and received as reward from the local king the revenue of an entire city. And the Sāṃkhya philosopher Vindhyavāsa, according to Paramārtha's *The Life of Vasubandhu*, defeated a Buddhist priest, upon which he received a reward from the king of three lacs of gold (which he distributed among the people at large; see below).³ We may be entitled to some cautious scepticism with respect to such tales, but it seems nonetheless likely that some debaters, sometimes, profited materially from their skills. The following passage from Yijing's account of India confirms this:⁴

After [preliminary studies] one receives instructions from a tutor for two or three years, mostly at Nālandā Monastery in Central India, or in the country of Valabhī in Western India. ... Those who are praised by wise authorities as excellent scholars become famous for their ability far and near. They may then believe that their sword of wisdom is sharp enough for them to go as competent persons to serve at the court of a king, making suggestions and displaying their knowledge, in hopes of being employed. When they take part in a debate, they always win the case and sit on double mats to show their unusual intelligence. When they carry on arguments to refute [heretics], they render their opponents tongue-tied in shame. Their fame resounds through the five mountains and their repute spreads within the four quarters. They receive feudal estates (grants of land, Takakusu) and are promoted to higher rank, with their names written in white high up on the gates of their houses.

¹ F. KIELHORN in «EpInd», 4 (1896-1897), pp. 300-309.

² J. F. FLEET in «EpInd» 5 (1898-1899), p. 237 ff.

³ BRONKHORST 2006, pp. 16-17.

⁴ LI RONGZI 2000, pp. 149-150; cp. TAKAKUSU 1896, pp. 177-178.

Information about debates usually reaches us from the winning side, which is not surprising. Occasionally, however, we come across the avowal that the skill in debate of others has done harm to one's own party. An example is Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranṅinī* 1.177-178, which reads:¹ «At that period the Bauddhas, whom the wise Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna protected, obtained preponderance in the land. After defeating in disputation all learned opponents, these enemies of tradition brought to an end the [observation of the] rites prescribed in the Nīla[mata]purāṇa.» The author of this passage is a Brahmin, who here admits the superior skills of the Buddhists in debating. However, elsewhere in the same chapter he points out what Brahmins are good at (1.160-161): «Beyond conception is the power which austerities gain for those mighty Brahmins, who are capable of reversing the fortune of even such great [rulers]. One has seen the royal fortune when it had been lost through the power of [rival] heirs and others, restored again; but [when once lost] in consequence of disrespect shown to Brahmins, it never returns.» In other words, you Buddhists may be good at debating, but we Brahmins have something that is more important, viz., supernatural power. Reading between the lines, we may conclude that kings were, or should be, more interested in the powers of Brahmins than in the debating skills of Buddhists.

If, then, debates between representatives of competing currents of thought were not primarily organized to amuse kings, how and why did they survive? How could disputatious philosophers induce kings and others to be present at their debates, and make them pronounce in favour of one or the other participant? The correct answer to these questions may well be the one suggested by Esther A. Solomon in her book *Indian Dialectics* (1976-1978; chapter 3). Solomon sees a connection with legal courts: «the procedure of a legal dispute, its requirements, the requirements of a plaint or the answer to it, the legal terminology [...] as also its flaws find their parallel in the procedure of intellectual disputes or debates and matters connected with them, and the syllogistic statement of the arguments» (p. 93).

Solomon's suggestion finds support in a remark by an unspecified commentator on Paramārtha's *The Life of Vasubandhu* to the extent that «it was customary for a king in India to keep a drum at the Royal Gate. When a man wants to appeal to the Court or to challenge a dispute, he has to beat it.» (TAKAKUSU 1904, p. 283 n. 66). Note the mention of the drum, once again. The drum, it appears from this passage, was the instrument by which anyone who needed it could demand justice. This demand for justice also included that incorrect philosophical opinions be rejected by the court. This is clear from the case described in *The Life of Vasubandhu*. Here the Sāṃkhya teacher Vindhyavāsa resolved to refute Buddhism. This he did in the following manner:²

[Vindhyavāsa] went to the country of Ayodhyā and beat the drum of dispute with his head and said: «I will dispute (with any Buddhist Śramaṇa). If I am defeated my opponent shall cut my head off; but if, on the contrary, he is beaten, he shall give me his head.» The King, Vikramāditya ..., being informed of the matter summoned the heretic and asked him about it, whereupon the latter answered: «Thou art, O King, the Lord of the Land, in whose mind there should be no partial love to either Śramaṇas or Brahmins. If there be any doctrines prevailing (in thy country) thou shouldst put them to the test (and see whether) they are right or wrong. Now I intend (to

¹ RĀJATARANĜINĪ 1.177-178; tr. Stein.

² TAKAKUSU 1904, p. 283 f. Cp. the discussion in LARSON & BHATTACHARYA 1987, p. 131 f.

dispute) with a disciple of Śākya-muni [= the Buddha] to determine which party is the winner or the loser. Each should vow to stake his own head.» The King thereupon gave him permission and despatched men to ask all the Buddhist teachers of the country in the following words: «Is there anyone who is able to oppose this heretic? Whosoever thinks himself competent should dispute with him.»

At that time the great Teachers of the Law, Manoratha, Vasubandhu, and others were all absent travelling in other countries...

There was at home only Buddhmitra the teacher of Vasubandhu. ... This Teacher of the Law was formerly very learned, but he was now advanced in years and therefore weak in mind and feeble in his speech. He said: «Now the great champions of the Law are all abroad. The heretic is strong and obstinate and must not be let alone any longer. I will now see to it myself.» He informed the King, who appointed a day on which he summoned a great assembly to the hall of discussion, where the heretic and the Buddhist teacher were to meet and dispute.

The heretic said: «Will you first set forth your opinion? Or will you refute the opinion first set forth by me?» The priest replied: «I am like a great ocean which swallows up all that comes. You are like a lump of earth which will be submerged if it comes to the ocean. You may do as you like.» His opponent said: «Then you had better set forth your own opinion (first). I will refute it.»

The Buddhist teacher, thereupon, set forth his doctrine of impermanence and said: «All composite things are in process of destruction every moment, why? because they disappear in the end.» He further supported this by various arguments. The heretic opponent could repeat all these arguments of the Buddhist priest after once hearing them and began to criticise them one by one by processes of reasoning. On being requested to commit to memory and repeat these refutations the priest failed to do so. He could not even re-construct his own arguments, though requested to do so.

Thus the Buddhist priest was completely defeated. The heretic said: 'You are a Brahmin by caste and I also am a Brahmin. We are not allowed to kill. I will beat you on the back instead, in order to show that I am the victor.' He did so. The king gave him three lacs of gold as a prize. On receiving the gold he distributed it among the people at large and returned to the Vindhya mountain where he entered a rocky cave.

Legal courts were a regular feature of Indian society, at least according to Brahmanical literature.¹ The *Arthaśāstra*, a political treatise dating from the beginning of the Common Era, emphasizes the need of unrestricted access to the king for all those who need it (1.19.26-29; tr. Kangle):

Arriving in the assembly hall (*upasthāna*), [the king] should allow unrestricted access (*advārāsaṅga*) to those wishing to see him in connection with their affairs. [...] he should look into the affairs of temple deities, hermitages (*āśrama*), heretics (*pāṣaṇḍa*), Brahmins learned in the Vedas (*śrotṛiya*), cattle and holy places, of minors, the aged, the sick, the distressed and the helpless and of women, in [this] order or in accordance with the importance of the matter or its urgency.

The interests of the Brahmins and their natural enemies, the heretics, have absolute priority in this list. The affairs of temple deities and hermitages concern the material side of the privileged position of Brahmins in society, for donations of land and villages to Brahmins are normally donated to temples or to individual Brahmins in the form of *agrahāras*, represented in Brahmanical literature as hermitages (*āśramas*).² The affairs

¹ Debates could also take place at the court of muslim rulers. GUÉRINOT (1908, p. 239) mentions «Siṃhakīrti, le logicien, qui défait les Bouddhistes à la cour du sultan Mahamuda de Dillī (peut-être Muḥammad IV, 1434-1443 ap. J.-C.)». Amartya Sen is of the opinion that arguments remain dear to Indians even today; see his *The Argumentative Indian* (2005).

² See my *Āśramas, agrahāras, and monasteries*, in preparation.

of heretics and Brahmins learned in the Vedas might cover disagreements between these two that have to be resolved in philosophical debates.

Justice – P. V. Kane reminds us in his monumental *History of Dharmaśāstra* – «was to be primarily dispensed by the king» (*HistDh* III, p. 268).¹ Numerous legal treatises specify that a king is to be assisted in this by a judge and various other learned and reliable persons; on no account should he dispense justice on his own. These treatises are, once again, skewed towards Brahmanical interests, and they put therefore much emphasis on the required presence of Brahmins in all courts of law. It is open to question whether all kings accepted these pro-Brahmanical recommendations. The outcome of debates between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical philosophers at a court of law consisting wholly or largely of Brahmins would be decided in advance, and would certainly discourage further debates of this kind. The fact that public debates at the royal court did take place for a long time suggests that a certain amount of objectivity was aspired to at at least some of those courts.

The preceding preliminary reflections do not justify us to conclude that all philosophical debates in classical and medieval India took place at legal courts presided over by the king. However, they do suggest that the most important ones – important in terms of the consequences they might entail – took place in such settings. Winning a public philosophical debate amounted therefore more or less to winning a court case. It follows that the rules of debate tended to be close to the rules that would apply in ordinary court cases. In brief, the rules of debate would primarily have the purpose of winning real debates, by hook or by crook, and would only secondarily concern ideal debates. There would be little tendency to put one's own position into question, and all the more to disqualify the position of the opponent in the eyes of outsiders («the king»).

We will assume that this situation prevailed already before the period about which we have direct evidence in the form of inscriptions and the testimony of foreign visitors. Some of the earliest manuals of debate that have survived confirm this assumption. These treatises dedicate a fair amount of space to hostile debates, and to the ways in which one can get the better of one's opponent. Since they have been studied by various scholars,² their presentation and analysis will not be part of this paper. One of the earliest treatises of this genre is part of a medical text, the *Caraka-saṃhitā*. Prets (2000, 369-71) paraphrases the passage that deals with hostile debate in the following words:³

The *Caraka-saṃhitā* gives an elaborate description of what a debater must take into consideration before he agrees to enter a hostile debate. Remarkably interesting, this description is unique in the history of the Indian dialectical tradition, giving a lively picture of various types of debaters (*vādin*) and juries (*pariṣad*), which sounds like a guide to modern public political panel or tv discussions. Accordingly, the debater must examine his opponent, the opponent's personal and intellectual strengths or weaknesses which might be superior, equal or inferior to those of his own, and must also examine the jury's level of knowledge, which is described as either learned (*jñānavat*) or ignorant (*mūḍha*), and which may have a friendly (*suhṛd*), indifferent (*udāsīna*) or hostile (*pratīniviṣṭa*) attitude towards the debater.

¹ See *HistDh* III, pp. 268-280 & 285-316 for an account of the court presided over by the king or his representative.

² Among them, DASGUPTA (1922, pp. 373-402), FRAUWALLNER (1984), KANG (2003), MATILAL (1985, chapter one; 1987), PRETS (2000; 2001; 2003; 2004), PREISENDANZ (2000), SOLOMON (1976-1978).

³ *Caraka-saṃhitā*, Vimānasthāna 8, pp. 18-25; cp. MEULENBELD 1999, p. 34 f.

According to this passage, a debater should enter a debate only if the opponent is equal or inferior, and only in the presence of a friendly or, at the very least, an ignorant or indifferent jury. No discussions should be carried out in the presence of a hostile jury or with a superior opponent. After having considered the weak points of his enemy in the course of debate, he should overpower him quickly:

«Under these circumstances the following [procedures] are ways of quickly defeating inferior [opponents]: He should overpower an unlearned [opponent] by long citations of *sūtras*; moreover, [he should overpower] an [opponent] who is weak in theoretical knowledge by [the use] of sentences containing troublesome words; an [opponent] who is unable to retain sentences, by a continuous series of sentences composed of long-strung *sūtras*; an [opponent] devoid of presence of mind, by the repetition of the same [words] with a difference of meaning; an [opponent] devoid of eloquence, by pointing to half-uttered sentences; an [opponent] devoid of self-confidence, by embarrassing [him]; an [opponent] of irritable temper, by putting [him] to exertion; one who is frightened, by terrifying [him]; [and] an inattentive [opponent], by reprehending him. In these ways he should overpower an inferior opponent quickly.»

Over and above that, he should take the jury into his confidence before entering such a debate, influencing it to name that with which he is familiar or that which could present great difficulties to the opponent as the subject of the debate and, at the beginning of the debate, he should pretend that the jury will set the subject and the rules of debate independently.

It is not necessary here to study in detail what tricks the ancient treatises propose to defeat one's opponent. Nor is this the occasion to appreciate the logical niceties that find expression in these texts. The aim of this paper is to present a first sketch of the ambiance in which debates in classical and medieval India took place. Our sources of information are meagre, but the preceding reflections may provide some idea.

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ABBREVIATIONS

«EpInd» = Epigraphia Indica.

HistDh = See KANE, HistDh.

KANE, HistDh = PANDURANG VAMAN KANE, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, second edition, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 5 vols., 1968-1977.

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